

## **SWEARING METHODOLOGICALLY: THE (IM)POLITENESS OF EXPLETIVES IN ANONYMOUS COMMENTARIES ON YOUTUBE**

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**ABSTRACT.** *This theoretical paper addresses the (im)politeness of swear words. The primary objective is to account for their nature and functions in anonymous Internet communication, represented by YouTube commentaries (and exemplified by those following snatches of “Borat”), in the light of recent approaches to (im)politeness, notably: second order (im)politeness, necessarily recruiting first order interpretations; intention-based approach; and relational work. The emerging postulate is that taboo words can display impoliteness (by manifesting aggression, power-building and abuse) or politeness (by fostering solidarity, common ground and humour). The nature and functions of cursing in anonymous commentaries are posited to be largely reminiscent of those appearing in oral interactions. Nevertheless, several characteristics of expletives appear to be peculiar to the discourse of an e-community of practice.*

*Keywords:* Catharsis, e-community of practice, impoliteness, intention, solidarity politeness, swear word/swearing.

## LAS PALABROTAS METODOLÓGICAMENTE: LA (FALTA DE) CORTESÍA DE LOS EXPLETIVOS EN COMENTARIOS ANÓNIMOS EN YOUTUBE

**RESUMEN.** *Este artículo teórico trata sobre la (falta de) cortesía en las palabrotas. El principal objetivo es dar cuenta de su naturaleza y de sus funciones en la comunicación anónima en Internet a la luz de los enfoques recientes sobre el estudio de la cortesía. Específicamente examinamos los comentarios en Youtube y damos ejemplos de aquellos relativos a “Borat”. La cortesía de segundo orden requiere necesariamente interpretaciones de primer orden: el enfoque intencional y trabajo relacional. El postulado emergente defiende que las palabras tabú pueden ser muestra de falta de cortesía si suponen agresión, poder o abuso, o de cortesía si fomentan la solidaridad, destacan aspectos comunes y el sentido del humor. La naturaleza y funciones de las palabrotas en los comentarios anónimos se consideran reminiscentes de aquellas en las interacciones orales. De todos modos, algunas características de los expletivos son específicas del discurso de la comunidad electrónica.*

*Palabras clave:* Catarsis, comunidad electrónica, falta de cortesía, intención, cortesía de solidaridad, palabrota.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

*Swear words* (used synonymously with *dirty words*, *vulgar words*, *taboo words/language*, *expletives*, *swearing*, *cursing* and *cussing*, despite any differences these terms exhibit, according to their dictionary definitions) tend to be deemed solely as impolite and are even reported to have constituted one of the first strands of research on impoliteness (see Bousfield and Culpeper 2008). Contrary to popular opinion, endorsed also in literature (Brown and Levinson 1987), the use of taboo language is not always impolite or face-threatening (cf. Jay and Janschewitz 2008). Given that no linguistic forms are inherently imbued with politeness or impoliteness, it can be hypothesised that cursing may actually be a manifestation of politeness within a given *community of practice* (Lave and Wenger 1991; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1992).

This article aims to tease out a number of methodological issues pertinent to studies on the (im)politeness of swearing, with special focus on Internet discourse, typified by written commentaries on YouTube. This necessitates the application of *second order (im)politeness*, which must be informed by the *first order* approach (see Locher and Bousfield 2008, Lorenzo-Dus 2009, Bousfield

2010, for a distinction between the two see Watts et al. 1992; Eelen 2001; Locher and Bousfield 2008; Bousfield 2008b, 2010). Additionally, a number of other theoretical issues central to (im)politeness research are addressed, such as the *relational view*, which is embedded in the first order approach (Watts 2003; Locher 2004, 2006; Locher and Watts 2005, 2008), the premise of speaker's intentions underlying (im)politeness (e.g. Culpeper 1996, 2005; Culpeper *et al.* 2003; Bousfield 2008a, 2008b), as well as (im)politeness norms negotiated within communities of practice (e.g. Mills 2003, 2005; Bousfield 2007; Graham 2007).

It is argued that the use of dirty words (not only) on the Internet can be placed along a continuum ranging from impoliteness to politeness. On the one hand, swearing may be a display of (intentional) impoliteness, serving verbal *abuse*, instrumental *aggression* and *power hierarchy building* among anonymous Internauts. On the other hand, cursing can be used as a *solidarity politeness* strategy, fulfilling a number of subordinate functions: promoting *group membership* and *common ground*, as well as engendering *humour*, whether aggression-based or purely benevolent. When performing this function, taboo words can convey numerous meanings or display many goals, such as praise (boosting the speaker's positive evaluation) or banter. Also, cussing helps vent one's negative emotions, thanks to its *cathartic* function (Wajnryb 2005), which is here claimed to be practically absent from Internet communication. Internauts' emotional use of dirty words in order to convey surprise or anger is fully controlled and intended to indicate hostility or solidarity. It will be argued that whether or not genuinely cathartic, expletives cannot be unequivocally categorised in terms of their (im)politeness, being dependent on the other two goals, as well as a number of other factors peculiar to norms negotiated within an *e-community of practice* (Graham 2007).

The theoretical discussion is conducted in the light of a broad, albeit informal, study of YouTube discussions and illustrated with examples quoted in unchanged form from YouTube commentaries garnered by one of the most provocative fictional characters of the last few years, Borat, who was constructed and portrayed by Sasha Baron Cohen. Publicised by YouTube users, long after "Borat's" cinema release in 2006, edited extracts of the feature film and TV series never cease to glean animated commentaries, customarily not on the film production as such. A YouTube search for "Borat" resulted in over 7,400 hits (last accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> July 2010), one of which was randomly chosen for the purpose of this paper. The selection of this data source is not governed by any particular criterion other than the fact that YouTube films featuring Borat are popular internationally among anonymous Internauts, as opposed to personalised pages whose owners publicise their self-made films. These personal

profiles are visited less often but regularly by the same viewers, frequently not entirely anonymous. Contrary to such small friendship-based groups, where politeness prevails, manifesting itself in politeness-oriented expletives, international YouTube pages browsed by thousands of practically anonymous Internauts are fertile ground for impoliteness, hence showing the full spectrum of swear words in their different functions.

## 2. INTRODUCTION TO SWEAR WORDS

Swearing is a multifarious and intriguing language phenomenon prevalent in real-life discourse, which deserves to be discussed theoretically (Wajnryb 2005). The topic does generate scholarly interest, even if scant, primarily within pragmatics, sociolinguistics and speech ethnography (e.g. Montagu 1967; Read 1977; Arango 1989; Andersson and Trudgill 1990, 2007; Bryson 1990; Jay 1992, 2000; Hughes 1991; Smith 1998; Daly et al. 2004; Dewaele 2004; Pinker 2007; van Lancker and Cummings 1999; Wajnryb 2005; Bell and Reverby 2005; McEney 2005; Stokoe and Edwards 2007; Singleton 2009, Stapleton 2010).

Swear words are usually related to taboo spheres, primarily sex (sexual taboos) and bodily functions (excretory/scatological taboos) and religion (profanity) (cf. Montagu 1967; Bryson 1990; Hughes 1991; Stapleton 2010). Nevertheless, it is not the case that all words representing tabooed topics are intrinsically foul (e.g. medical jargon). Additionally, no words manifest inherent tabooeness, being socio-cultural constructs emerging as a result of societal prohibition (Andersson and Trudgill 1990, 2007). While categories of expletives show marked regularity, both cross-culturally and historically (Montagu 1967; Stapleton 2010), particular words manifest diachronic instability (Montagu 1967; cf. Hughes 1991; Singleton 2009) and frequently arise out of words which did not use to be obscene (Read 1977). As Singleton (2009)<sup>1</sup> postulates, to become vulgar, words need to pertain to tabooed spheres, must necessarily carry the potential for being used as cathartic vehicles and/or terms of abuse, as well as display literal and non-literal senses. It is also worth noting that dirty words need not convey their basic literal semantic meaning when used to abuse another person or to give vent to emotions (Hughes 1991; Read 1977).

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<sup>1</sup> Although Singleton does not acknowledge this, his postulate resembles Andersson and Trudgill's (2007: 195), who list these factors: "refers to something taboo or stigmatised", "is not to be interpreted literally" and "expresses strong emotions or attitudes". However, the second and third criteria provoke misgivings, since it is also literal use of words without attitude expression that counts as a taboo (e.g. vulgar terms denoting body parts).

Generally, three major functions of expletives can be differentiated, viz. *social connection* (also referred to as *solidarity*), *catharsis* and *aggression* (Wajnryb 2005). Cathartic function and aggressive function, which coincides with “abusive or vituperative swearing” (Wajnryb 2005: 30), are compatible with Pinker’s (2007) conceptualisation of cursing as a means of releasing pain and anger. Admittedly, these two functions can be tightly intertwined, for a word of abuse may be used for the sake of catharsis, i.e. to vent one’s anger verbally at another individual. This tripartite division of functions will here serve as the basis for the discussion of (im)politeness of swear words on YouTube.

### 3. SWEAR WORDS AND FIRST ORDER POLITENESS/ETIQUETTE

Irrespective of the premise known in second order (im)politeness that no words carry (im)politeness by nature (cf. the next section), lay language users have a tendency towards a different opinion. As Bousfield (2010) rightly notes, daily occurrences reported in the media, as well as legal acts testify that, in first order politeness, expletives are conventionally considered impolite/rude (in non-theoretic terms, the two words may be used interchangeably). Thus, language users tend to consider them to be offensive, at least in formal contexts, or prohibited by the letter of the law, speakers’ intentions and situational factors notwithstanding. This is compatible with Culpeper’s (2010) concept of contextually conventionalised impoliteness formulae, which need not be based on people’s first-hand experience but knowledge, for instance of impoliteness metadiscourse. Swear words impinge on social norms, which are upheld by metadiscourse. Consequently, language users are well aware that taboo words are generally disallowed, socially and legally. Interestingly, Culpeper (2010) reports on the relatively low frequency of two vulgar words in the light of his corpus studies, arguing that, although relatively low, their occurrence may actually stem from the fact that some proportion of the corpus originates in computer-mediated interaction, which displays a high degree of impoliteness. Indeed, focusing solely on Internet communication, such as that on YouTube, one will appreciate that commentaries overflow with impoliteness, one category of which is cussing. However, not all of its manifestations are geared towards impoliteness.

Needless to say, taboo words are indeed used, even if they contravene etiquette and legal norms. Several parameters affect language users’ idiosyncratic perceptions of dirty words both in spoken communication and in computer-mediated discourse. The umbrella parameter determining the (im)politeness status of such words in communication is people’s sensitivity to them, which appears to be both culturally and contextually dependent, as well as individual. A person’s perception of

swearing is contingent on a few pragmatic variables, viz. the speaker (his/her social position, profession, gender, and age), contextual factors (e.g. discourse type and relationship with the interlocutor), and a type of word, for each imprecation carries greater or lesser face threat (cf. Jay 1992; Jay and Janschewitz 2008). Therefore, in certain communities of practice or within social groups (e.g. construction workers or even teenage friends), cursing is commonplace, in a sense polite, and it appears to be saliently offensive only to a person not belonging to the group. On the other hand, there might be individuals who never/very rarely cuss and find it objectionable and impolite/rude, any other factors regardless.

The abovementioned variables aside, a statement may be ventured that people's growing indifference to four-letter words is consequent upon their proliferation in contemporary media discourse, primarily in American film dialogues and stand-ups. The instinctively felt (rather than semantically motivated) level of offensiveness (cf. Dewaele 2004) a given word carries decreases with the frequency of its usage (Jay 1992; Thelwall 2008), which is captured by the notion of a "swearing paradox" (Beers Fagersten 2007). However, vulgar language in the media is largely culture dependent. For instance, Polish rules appear to be staid in this respect, and the occurrence of foul language in TV discourse is restricted to relatively rare cases of film dialogues. On the other hand, while in the UK all swearing is allowed on TV (albeit with time restrictions), in the USA, there is a ban on "seven dirty words" (Sapolsky and Kaye 2005; Thelwall 2008), with the exception of film dialogues, which exploit taboo words freely (Jay 1992). A hypothesis can be formulated that this linguistic practice is legitimised on the grounds that expletives are enclosed within the meta-frame of deliberately constructed fictitious discourse, which is why they do not bear the force of those heard in real-life conversations. The ramifications of this fact are that crude language in fictional dialogues is scarcely regarded as being scandalous, with audiences becoming more and more desensitised to it. In consequence, the force of taboo words employed in real-life discourse is mitigated as well. Interestingly, used creatively (e.g. in peculiar clusters) in media discourse, obscene words happen to be conventionalised by the target audience, who incorporate them in their conversations, heedless of the offensiveness they carry. For instance, teenagers quote extracts from "South Park" or women talk about "emotional fuckwittage" after a perusal of "Bridget Jones's Diary". Thereby, language users bear out their shared experience, i.e. *common ground* (Brown and Levinson 1987), and forge *in-group solidarity* (cf. Brown and Gilman 1960; Scollon and Scollon 1983, 1995; Wardaugh 1986).

Finally, the perceived emotional impetus of vulgar words is highest in one's native language and gradually declines in languages learned later in life (Dewaele

2004). The sensitivity to dirty words heard and uttered will, therefore, vary for native speakers and second language learners. Admittedly, the latter cannot fully appreciate the negative force of foreign taboo words, tending to use them freely and somewhat innocuously. For example, Poles appear to be uninhibited about interweaving the English f-word into their informal conversations in Polish. Given that a considerable percentage of YouTube commentaries must be posted by non-native language users, the frequent use of swear words may be partly attributed to commentators' (distorted) perception of their lesser face-threat.

#### 4. APPROACHES TO (IM)POLITENESS

As already indicated, the present discussion is premised on the distinction between first order politeness (lay language users' approach to politeness) and second order politeness first addressed by Watts *et al.* (1992) and Eelen (2001). The dichotomy is also applied to impoliteness (Locher and Bousfield 2008; Bousfield 2008b, 2010). Researchers tend to argue in favour of moving scholarly analysis to how participants themselves view (im)politeness in discourse (Haugh 2007; Mills 2003; Watts 2003), in order to ensure that the "analyst's interpretation is consonant or analogous with the participant's understanding" (Haugh 2007: 311). This article champions a tenet that second order approach needs to recruit first order understandings (Locher and Bousfield 2008; Lorenzo-Dus 2009; Bousfield 2010). Accordingly, second order terms should be used to capture first order communicative phenomena.

Many definitions of (im)politeness highlight the importance of the speaker's intention and contextual factors as its two co-determinants. According to the model of intention-based impoliteness (e.g. Culpeper 2005, 2008; Culpeper *et al.* 2003; Bousfield 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Lorenzo-Dus 2009) espoused here, it is verbal acts which are produced with an intention to cause harm that should be conceptualised as impoliteness, as opposed to (unintentional) *rudeness*. The latter is anchored in utterances which, even if produced intentionally as such, are not intended to give rise to face threat, and yet they do from the hearer's perspective. Therefore, besides the speaker's intention and awareness of the effects an utterance carries, the hearer's perspective must also be accounted for, which leads to a range of interactional effects, also relying on the hearer's recognition of the speaker's intent and the actual face damage experienced (Bousfield 2008b, 2010). From the perspective of second order politeness, inferring intentions is a vexing methodological procedure. As Culpeper *et al.* (2003: 1552) convincingly note, "There is no claim, then, that one can reconstruct the actual intentions of speakers, but rather that 'plausible' intentions can be

reconstructed, given adequate evidence.” Admittedly, even on the first order level, interactants can never be absolutely certain about each another’s intentions, although those are central to the recognition of (im)politeness. Relevant here is Brown’s (1995: 169) observation on politeness as residing “in the attribution of polite intentions”, while interlocutors “must continuously work at inferring each other’s intentions, including whether or not politeness is intended.”

From the relational point of view, (im)politeness can be defined as “a discursive concept arising out of interactants’ perceptions and judgments of their own and others’ verbal behavior” (Locher and Watts 2005: 10) or as “the subjective judgments people make about the social appropriateness of verbal and non-verbal behaviour” (Spencer-Oatey 2005). Accordingly, (im)politeness depends on the relationship between participants and the speech practices they negotiate (Locher and Watts 2005), while impoliteness amounts to “breaches of norms that are negatively evaluated by interactants according to their expectation frames” (Locher and Watts 2008: 81). Norms within an e-community of practice emerge as a result of members’ collaborative work and hold by default but are consciously appreciated primarily when infringed, whether or not intentionally. If violation is purposeful, impoliteness arises, whereas rudeness derives from unintentional communicative failure (cf. Bousfield 2008b, 2010).

Additionally, a distinction must be drawn between the speaker’s intended meanings (ideally recognised by the hearer), in accordance with norms within a given community of practice, and the linguistic means by dint of which those can be formulated. In essence, no linguistic form can be either polite or impolite, since it is not expressions themselves but situational factors and speakers’ intentions that determine (im)politeness (Fraser and Nolen 1981; Fraser 1990; Brown 1995; Holmes 1995; Spencer-Oatey 2005; Watts 2003; Locher 2004, 2006; Locher and Watts 2005, 2008; Locher and Bousfield 2008; Mills 2005; Culpeper 2005, cf. 2010).

On the other hand, a number of researchers hold a belief that there are indeed immanently impolite acts, such as reproaches, threats or insults performed with the intrinsic purpose of undermining the hearer’s face (Haverkate 1988). Nevertheless, a contention is here made that whereas certain communicative acts have a tendency towards carrying politeness (e.g. thanking) or impoliteness (e.g. offending), linguistic expressions in which they are couched are apt to modify, either strengthen or mitigate, their force. Furthermore, on occasion, utterances’ functions may be significantly different, if not opposite to their conventional use (e.g. ironic thanking for having been done harm). Additionally, as several authors (Culpeper 2005, 2010; Leech 2005/2007; Terkourafi 2008; Bousfield 2008a) rightly note, chosen language forms are conventionally judged as polite or impolite, for semantic factors or conventions typical of a particular community of practice override secondary



contextual factors. Admittedly, the latter can, nonetheless, achieve greater salience and foreground interpretations less available initially. A similar postulate can be traced in Leech's work, unduly criticised for presenting politeness as inhering in conventionalised utterances or acts (see Bousfield 2008a). Referring to the conventionality of certain (im)polite utterances, Leech (1983) distinguishes the phenomenon of *absolute politeness* vis-à-vis *relative politeness*. Later, Leech (2007 [2005]) discards these terms in favour of *semantic politeness* and *pragmatic politeness*, respectively. This dichotomy suggests that "Some illocutions (*e.g.* orders) are inherently impolite, and others (*e.g.* offers) are inherently polite", while behaviours must also be judged "relative to some norm of behaviour which, for a particular setting, they regard as typical. The norm may be that of a particular culture or language community" (Leech 1983: 83). Craig *et al.* (1986) propose a similar bifurcation, namely message strategies and social judgment, the latter originating from contextual assumptions.

All the tenets presented above are of immediate relevance to expletives, whose (im)politeness is hinged on message senders' intentions and norms obtaining for an e-community. Undoubtedly, assessing the (im)politeness of swear words "involves the difficult task of determining participants' identity, relationship, social norms, intentions and motivations" (Jay and Janschewitz 2008: 269). Any second order study on taboo words should subscribe to the relational view, as well as make conjectures about language users' polite/impolite intentions. This is particularly problematic in the case of YouTube comments, for little evidence is adduced as regards interlocutors' intentions other than meanings emerging from the texts as such. Predicting this, commentators should try to be unequivocal in their statements, but misunderstandings can arise. Also, commentaries are commonly dissociated and few interactions are maintained longer than over two contributions by the same interactants. In longer topical strands, each comment is usually contributed by a different Internet user, which is why inferences about interactions can be generated, primarily in the light of norms and expectations developed in an e-community of practice (Graham 2007).

## 5. IMPOLITENESS ON YOUTUBE: NORM OR IMPOLITENESS?

Internet communication among members of an e-community is based on negotiable *netiquette* norms (Preece 2004; Androutsopoulos 2006; Graham 2005, 2007, 2008), whose violation leads to impoliteness (or rudeness) (Haugh 2010). On the one hand, norms and tendencies specific to virtual communication are similar to those underlying face-to-face interactions (Graham 2007; Stommel 2008; de Oliveria 2007; Haugh 2010), even if they do display differences (Locher

2010). For example, *flaming* is a prevalent Internet phenomenon infringing norms sanctioned by Internauts (Avgerinakou 2003), which is tantamount to “the antinormative hostile communication of emotions”, which embraces “profanity, insults, and other offensive or hurtful statements” (Johnson *et al.* 2008: 419, cf. Shea 1994). Given its nature, it is hardly surprising that flaming should be captured by impoliteness (Graham 2008, Haugh 2010), while swear words are viewed as vehicles for both.

On the whole, Internet forums are frequently rife with impoliteness (Graham 2007, 2008; Nishimura 2008, 2010; Angouri and Tseliga 2010), which is more acute and virulent than that in oral interactions (Graham 2008) and is sometimes perceived as a norm (Angouri and Tseliga 2010). This raises a question of whether *conventionalised aggression* should be equated with impoliteness (Harris 2001) at all. Other notions, such as *sanctioned aggressive facework* (Watts 2003), appear to be better terms to capture this phenomenon. Similarly, Mills (2003, 2005) regards impoliteness as transgression of norms, and thus claims, in opposition to Culpeper (1996, 2005) or Bousfield (2008a), that in certain communities of practice, aggressive behaviour is a norm and can hardly be interpreted as impoliteness. However, even if *sanctioned*, blatant aggression need not be, and usually is not, *neutralised* in context, which is why it should be recognised as impoliteness (Culpeper 2005). This holds true for YouTube commentaries, which tend to be saturated with abusive imprecations that ought to be conceptualised as second order impoliteness.

## 6. SWEARING AND ABUSE

Swear words may be used with an intention to harm, demean, or denigrate another person or attribute negative characteristics to him/her (Jay 1996). YouTube comments appear to be replete with taboo words carrying disparagement and verbal abuse, and hence they may be conceived as strategies of impoliteness (Bousfield and Culpeper 2008) used to offend others: a member of the film crew (see example 1), a YouTube user who has publicised the film (see example 2), and most frequently, other commentators (see examples 3–5).

- (1) wrldeye12: Hes English-Jewish -- stupid asshole<sup>2</sup>
- (2) LYRICALMESSIAH760: Dude whoever made this fuckin video your a fucking moron I cant even watch this shit cuz they gay ass laugh sequence you put in is to fucking annoying.

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<sup>2</sup> All examples are quoted in their original form, without any editorial changes.

- (3) KorexMilas: why he says dzie dobry, jak si masz and dzi kuj in polish langue  
ijake93i: shut up polish cunt
- (4) Korentokuulla: whats wrong with turkish?  
Pederasii: just so coz i am holding a grudge against them/u for no good reason:D i am bulgarian think again u dumb fuck
- (5) MrSkate4weed: gypsy how did you aquire such a computer,who have you stolen this device from gypsy? do not tell me gypsy i tell you, is this understood?  
tranceition: Idiot, i'm german by origin you fucking miserable inferior race!  
But I call myself a romanian, because i was born there ... so shut the fuck up dumb illiterate monkey, nigger !

Although it is here asserted that swear words do not always promote impoliteness, it should be observed that, according to the prevailing taxonomy of impoliteness strategies, positive impoliteness includes the use of taboo language, swearing and being otherwise abusive (Culpeper 1996; Culpeper *et al.* 2003). By contrast, negative impoliteness embraces scorning and ridiculing (Culpeper 1996; Culpeper *et al.* 2003), which may also revolve around expletives.

It is the message sender's anonymity (Smith 1999; Danet 2001) and lack of potential repercussions that appear to be responsible for the abundance of aggressive imprecations on the Internet. To be able to add comments, YouTube users need to register, providing their nicknames, usually unrevealing, and basic information (e.g. age, provenance or interests), all of which might as well be fake. The result is then full anonymity. As Dery (1994: 1) rightly notes, anonymous Internauts "tend to feel that they can hurl insults with impunity." One may venture to claim that vitriolic commentators fear no retribution other than reciprocal verbal impoliteness, potentially relishing forthcoming revenge and bracing themselves for intensified attack. It is noteworthy that commentaries added on personal pages of authors who glean fan groups do not seem to display (many) abusive terms and are not suffused with impoliteness. One reason may be that amateur film authors control their pages and block indecent commentaries. Another is that viewers who visit a given web page regularly do enjoy it and will not post abusive commentaries. Additionally, viewers also happen to be the author's friends in reality or virtual reality and they at times reveal their genuine identity, even if sketchily.

A co-dependent goal of abusive cursing is the manifestation of *power*, whose correlation with impoliteness is frequently appreciated in literature (e.g. Eelen

2001; Harris 2001; Watts 2003; Mills 2003; Locher 2004; Limberg 2008; Mullany 2008). Analysing perceived instrumental rudeness (here termed impoliteness), Beebe (1995) posits that it is deployed, among other goals, to assert one's power, viz. to appear superior, for instance via insults and putdowns. Indeed, the use of dirty words to offend others may be viewed as impoliteness-based manifestation of power in verbal interactions, which is "part of how interactants shape and present their identity (Locher 2004: 37). While Culpeper (1996, 2008) affirms that impoliteness is more likely to emerge in cases of power imbalance, which is validated in the context of a number of discourse types (Kasper 1990; Locher 2004; Bousfield 2008b), it is here argued that power display arises also when the hearer's/reader's identity, and more importantly, the speaker's/sender's identity remain indeterminate. Most significant is the fact that power built over another individual need not be commensurate with that wielded in reality. Anonymity allows for power to be built only verbally. Incidentally, many of those offended cannot experience the abuse, if they never read the commentary (which is the case of web users who visit a page only once, or "Borat's" production crew), of which virulent commentators must also be cognisant. Moreover, sometimes abuse is showered on unspecified people (e.g. all those who claim Borat uses Polish). Such abuse is a matter of power display, while unaddressed readers must recognise the impolite act, even if personally not taking offence at it.

## 7. SWEARING AND VENTING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

One of the three fundamental roles of swear words is the expression of negative feelings, such as pain, ire or frustration (Montagu 1967; Jay 2000; Pinker 2007), thanks to which they perform the cathartic function. Speakers thus vent their negative emotions and simultaneously communicate them to hearers (see Jay 1992, 2000), sometimes abusing the latter, thereby conforming also to the abusive function. Such manifestations of emotions should be stifled according to formal etiquette (cf. Kasper 1990; Beebe 1995; Jay and Janschewitz 2008), yet they stand a strong chance of being more acceptable in informal contexts and in closer relationships.

Jay and Janschewitz (2008) differentiate between *propositional swearing* and *nonpropositional swearing*, the former defined as being intentional and controllable and the latter as being unplanned, unintentional and uncontrollable, which seems to mirror cathartic swearing. The authors claim that nonpropositional swearing, which is related to catharsis, cannot be judged on its (im)politeness, as long as the hearer knows that the speaker's use of a four-

letter word is unintentional. This postulate gives rise to misgivings. First of all, whether premeditated or emotionally induced, most dirty words are produced intentionally (even if below one's awareness threshold), a salient exception being Tourette's syndrome, which causes the speaker to use taboo language without intent or rational control. Save this and other psychiatric disorders, ordinary cases of cathartic deployment of vulgar language are intentional, even if affected by emotions. This is because emotions do not stand in direct opposition to intentionality in terms of meaning production (cf. Gibbs 1999). To reformulate, emotional arousal (e.g. love or hatred) does not normally mean that intentionality is suspended entirely, even if the speaker does not consciously recognise his/her intentions. Secondly, it could be argued that, irrespective of whether the hearer is aware of the speaker's motives and emotions, the former may still judge cathartic swearing according to its (im)politeness/rudeness on the first order level. Emotionally loaded cussing may not be premeditated and/or consciously produced impoliteness, but it is rudeness consequent upon unintended offence arising from intentional, yet emotional, verbalisations.

In either case, such a purely cathartic function of swearing is hardly conceivable in the context of written discourse, due to the asynchronous (Herring 2007) nature of Internet forums or collections of commentaries. A YouTube user will have ample time to have second thoughts and refrain from using an expletive, or at least delete it before accepting the final version of a comment. Also, employing taboo language, while discussing one another's comments or publicised films, Internauts cannot be acting in the heat of the moment. They exert full control over their means of expression, given the written communicative mode and little significance of evoking stimuli. Therefore, it is postulated here that allegedly cathartic swear words, usually corroborating senders' anger, can coincide with abuse, which will normally be deemed as impolite (see examples 6 and 7). On the contrary, they may act as politeness forms if they do not overtly attack anybody, being meant to add colour to comments, which will be discussed in the next section (see example 8).

- (6) bmskz777: you are just mad because you are jew!  
 1cme1: stfu bitch, i m not jew.p.s. Borat movie made in Romania.
- (7) kazgirl123456789: @Msloveutub I AGREE WITH YOU THAT HE IS AN IDIOT!!!! ITS OFFENSIVE!!! KAZAKHSTAN IS NOT BAD AT ALL!!!! I HATE HIM  
 supersyyyxxxx: @kazgirl123456789 damn hoe chill the fuck out. you got some serious anger issues you need to work out. im sure theres a kazak version of dr.phil you can talk to or some shit.

- (8) blueboy4rock: No fucking kazakstan its filmed in Romania... my fucking country:\ in the worst part of it .. wtf im talking bout all the country its full of shit.. excepting the nature

In conclusion, the judgement of pseudo-cathartic swear words in terms of their (im)politeness depends heavily on other factors, namely whether they are related to abuse (impoliteness) or solidarity (politeness), together with their particular discursual functions.

## 8. SWEARING AND SOLIDARITY

The solidarity-building function of taboo words embraces a myriad of possible meanings/functions that these words can acquire/perform including: the emphasis of positive emotions, testament to community membership and social bonding, praising, or humour. On the whole, cursing may be a manifestation of camaraderie, as captured by the notion of *social swearing* (Montagu 1967; Wajnryb 2005; cf. Stapleton 2010). While in formal discourse vulgar words are perceived as the violation of etiquette norms within first order politeness, friendly and intimate relationships, based on power balance and little social distance (cf. Brown and Levinson 1987), allow for breaching conventions of *deference politeness*, while serving *solidarity politeness* (Scollon and Scollon 1983, 1995). Relaxed environments allow for more dirty words than formal ones do (Jay and Janschewitz 2008). Flaunting the use of expletives is commonplace in certain communities of practice and is not found offensive, even if most language users must hold a background assumption that such words are obscene and, in interactions outside the group, would be looked upon as rude/impolite.

Solidarity in an e-community of practice is facilitated by anonymity, which guarantees online equality (Angouri and Tseliga 2010). Due to this, even if unfamiliar to one another, Internet users feel entitled to forge informal relationships, regardless of their background, and thus potential power imbalance or social distance, to which they are oblivious. This manifests itself in their use of colloquial register studded with swear words, as long as they do not carry abuse. A proviso must be made, however, that some Internet users might find such discourse objectionable, which is at odds with the communicator's intention. From the second order vantage point, this will be conceptualised as rudeness resulting from individuals' idiosyncratic sensitivity to taboo words, misattribution of intention or lack of familiarity with an e-community's norms.

Moreover, since nicknames are frequently gender neutral, Internet users remain anonymous in terms of gender (Yates 1997), which allows women to

curse on an equal basis with men, contrary to the folk opinion that “good girls do not swear”, which happens to be advocated in well-entrenched gender literature. On the strength of sound data analyses, researchers adduce evidence that women do cuss very frequently (Bailey and Timm 1976; Coates 1986; Stapleton 2003; Hey 1997; Jay 1992, 2000; McEnery 2005; de Klerk 1992, 1977; Hughes 1992; Gordon 1993; Dynel 2011). On the other hand, in first order politeness, this practice continues to be filtered through stereotypical conceptions of femininity/masculinity, acting to women’s disadvantage (cf. e.g. Risch 1987; de Klerk 1992, 1997; Hughes 1992). This problem of gendered language use disappears in an e-community.

Both in oral discourse and in Internet commentaries, swear words orientated towards solidarity politeness tend to be used as discourse markers and may be conceived as peculiar emphasisers (Stapleton 2003), that is indicators of positive emotions, such as surprise, amazement or amusement, which may also implicitly convey positive evaluation (see examples 8, 9 and 10). The frequency of use of taboo may sometimes be such that dirty words are reminiscent of “punctuation marks”, whose presence is motivated exclusively by a language user’s wish to deploy them with no restraints (see example 8). Besides adding emphasis and colour to verbalisations, such expletives carry practically no other semantic meaning. On the other hand, dirty words are also used as vulgar synonyms for semantically relevant words, for which inoffensive equivalents could easily substitute (see examples 11, 12) and seem to be deployed only to flaunt the taboo and make the language more colourful and attractive.

(9) sharen0922phil: fuckiiiiiiin love this!!lol

(10) PigFucker000: fucking fucking funny

(11) ManOfSteel2627 this motherfuckercuntass has musik from kosovo kale kale

(12) ThePyrology: At 15:37 he’s about to piss himself laughing...I love that bit.

Also, dirty words in YouTube comments frequently amount to film quotations the viewers have just learnt, which can be considered a meta-linguistic use of swear words (see example 13), thereby testifying to their newly built common ground and indicating their amusement (see below).

(13) ThatFlyPolishGirl : ‘I had good shiit’ hahahaha

What is significant is that in oral interactions, the solidarity-building function of cursing includes *ritual abuse* (Abrahams 1962; Kuiper 1991; Hughes 1992; Pilkington 1998; Daly et al. 2004), which serves common ground building, as a positive politeness strategy (Brown and Levinson 1987). In other words, insults

“function in certain contexts as effective solidarity-building devices” (Lorenzo-Dus 2007: 145). In particular, extreme insults, which can be perceived as a form of banter, are characteristic of masculine conversational style in the process of establishing a sense of in-group solidarity (de Klerk 1997; Coates 2002). This holds primarily for spoken discourse, but can rarely be noticed in written discourse on the Internet. This is most likely because ritual abuse is more difficult to distinguish from genuinely meant imprecations, given the lack of common ground developed in past interactions and non-verbal cues, both of which are commonly present in friendly face-to-face oral interactions.

Cussing orientated towards solidarity politeness may also be looked upon as a social identity management strategy within a community of practice or an e-community. Using dirty words, a language user appears to communicate that he/she has no qualms about violating linguistic conventions of appropriateness, which is interpersonally attractive. This attractiveness of expletives, and hence their producer, is related to the ethos of the forbidden fruit, which is craved merely because it is disallowed, as reflected by Read’s (1977) notion of *inverted taboo*.

Instead of responding to the taboo in the normal fashion, by avoiding such words, some people respond to it by a re-doubled use of the words. They wish to feel the thrill of doing the forbidden [...] This is not a breaking of the taboo, but an observance of the taboo in a manner contrary to the normal. (Read 1977: 12)

It can be hypothesised that a speaker who curses profusely comes over as being a nonconformist, or a “linguistic rebel”. This explains the prevalence of dirty words in slang created by young people, who thereby mark their defiance and independence, and simultaneously foster in-group solidarity politeness (cf. Scollon and Scollon 1983, 1995), which obtains also in the case of an e-community.

Furthermore, as can be gathered on the basis of some examples (see examples 8, 11, 13) the use of taboo language may be conducive to *humour* creation. Circumscribed by rules of political correctness, taboos have long since been acknowledged (cf. Freud 1960 [1905]) as a socially accepted subject of humour, thanks to which interlocutors testify their solidarity (Norrick 1993). More importantly, it is even taboo words that can be the source of humour (Andersson and Trudgill 1990, 2007; Liladhar 2000), inasmuch as they break loose from externally imposed restraints on language, whether spoken in everyday conversation or written on the Internet.

The underlying mechanism of humour pivoted on swearing can be described as *incongruity* (see Dynel 2009 and references therein) based on discursal



inappropriateness. For instance, the use of taboo language may be considered humorous if it relies on deliberate register violation. If the speaker uses an elevated or formal style and suddenly says a four-letter word, the result is humorous incongruity. A similar effect develops if a dirty word is uttered by a person who is not expected to do thus at all, even in informal interchanges, e.g. a professor or an elderly lady. Furthermore, an uncommon accumulation of swear words in one utterance/speech is apt to lead to humour. Incidentally, positive comments corroborate Internet users' enjoyment of foul language in YouTube films, such as "Most Swearing in 30 Seconds", "Celebrity Swearing" "Swearing 3-Year Old" or "Rude Old Lady".

On the other hand, taboo words used impolitely in the abuse function are apt to breed humorous disparagement (see examples 2, 4, 5, 8), as captured by *superiority theories* of humour (for an overview see e.g. Keith-Spiegel 1972; Martin 2007). Based on different (non)participant types (Dynel 2010a), disaffiliative humour, e.g. that couched in imprecations, performs two functions simultaneously, namely it victimises the target via disparagement, belittlement, debasement, degradation, humiliation, etc. for the sake of another party's amusement (Dynel 2010b). Humour researchers posit that to experience merriment from disparaging humour, an individual must nurture a negative feeling or attitude towards, or display disaffiliation from, the butt. However, this attitudinal aspect tends to be absent in the case of one commentator's ridicule of another, since YouTube interactions are frequently only isolated instances, and interlocutors have very little knowledge of one another. Essentially, not being the addressee of an abusive term, an Internet user may (but does not have to, finding the remark distasteful) take pleasure in another party being downgraded merely out of spite. This function of swearing ties in with the postulate that impoliteness can be a source of TV entertainment (Culpeper 2005) and a vehicle for generating amusement on the Internet (Nishimura 2010, cf. Danet 1998).

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

This theory-driven article conflated two different strands of research, elaborating the workings of swear words against the backdrop of (im)politeness studies. Support was given to second order (im)politeness view, on the understanding that it must capitalise on first order (im)politeness, allowing also for speaker's conscious intention to come over as (im)polite and the hearer's recognition of the speaker's communicative goals, in accordance with norms negotiated in a community of practice. Notwithstanding their pejorative semantic

potential and tabooess, acknowledged by both researchers and lay language users, it was proposed that dirty words are not inherently impolite across all contexts and communities of practice. Several correlates and functions of swear words were discussed as being pertinent to friendly communities of practice, with special attention paid to the YouTube e-community.

On the one hand, cursing may serve abuse, instrumental aggression, and power hierarchy building among anonymous Internet users. This claim is in accord with the postulate of prevalent, albeit not neutralised, impoliteness on the Internet, facilitated by interactants' anonymity. Constructing their profiles, Internauts, notably YouTube users, can reveal real information about them as they see fit. Consequently, they are uninhibited about hurling abuse, thereby seizing power rhetorically, with no fear of serious repercussions.

On the other hand, anonymity is also conducive to equality, owing to which Internauts forge friendly bonds. Accordingly, cussing may engender solidarity politeness and facilitate positive identity construction within a community of practice. Moreover, foul language generates humour, either entirely benevolent or aggressive, whereby affiliation between group members is built at the expense of parties disparaged. Finally, a hypothesis was propounded that pure cathartic swearing is absent from asynchronous e-communication, while instances ostensibly indicative of this function can be encompassed by either of the other two paramount goals. Overall, it is hoped that the article substantiated an assumption that expletives are multifarious and need to be studied methodologically.

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